An Introduction to the digitised version of F. Scuvée and J. Verague (1988) Le gisement sous-marin du Paléolithique Moyen de l'anse de la Mondrée à Fermanville (Manche). Étude archéologique et géomorphologique. Centre d'études historiques et préhistorique. Littus, Cherbourg, Ministère des Affaires Culturelles.

The site of Biéroc-La Mondrée is located offshore of the Cotentin Peninsula on the Normandy coastline of northern France, near the town of Fermanville, just east of Cherbourg. At approximately 20 m below sea level, it has the distinction of being one of the earliest and deepest underwater archaeological sites in Europe to have been discovered and systematically investigated by divers, and one of the oldest in date, with Mousterian artefacts in a layer of buried peat and silt protected by a covering of sand. The peat layer was discovered by dredging in 1968 and divers sent down to investigate failed to discover any cultural material until 1970 when artefacts were found eroding from beneath a layer of marine sand. Subsequent investigation beginning the following year involved divers, mostly volunteers, who operated in short 35-minute shifts because of the depth. The divers used 1m x 1m metal frames to record the finds and hand-driven plastic tubes to obtain sediment cores. During the course of 250 dives and 130 hours of dive time, the team recovered over 2500 Middle Palaeolithic artefacts, a horse tooth and two long bones of mammals. Given that this was in the early 1970s, when archaeological investigation of submerged landscapes was scarcely recognised as a worthwhile archaeological activity, and the great wealth of underwater discoveries elsewhere had yet to be revealed, along with the development of the techniques and technologies for their recovery, the working methods and results achieved at La Mondrée would not be a discredit to a modern underwater excavation. More than half a century later, when underwater investigations of this type are being carried out in increasing numbers across the world and are now recognised internationally as a major subfield of the discipline, the La Mondrée research deserves recognition as a pioneering piece of work.

Like many a pioneer piece of research, the work attracted little attention at the time, and the published report has remained elusive. Frédéric Scuvée produced an unpublished report in 1970 (cited in Mercier et al 2013) a brief preliminary note two years later (Scuvée 1972), and the full report in 1988 with Jean Verague, published in Cherbourg by the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs (Scuvée and Verague 1988). When I recently tried to obtain a copy of this report, an inter-library loan request through my local University library sourced the volume

from the Bavarian State Library. According to an internet search, copies are also available in a small number of French and Spanish libraries.

The full report contains detailed information about sea-level positions, sediments, stratigraphy and topography, supported by hand-drawn diagrams recorded in immaculate detail, and a detailed description and illustration of the stone tools. The authors considered that the site must have been occupied during a marine regression to a depth of at least 25 m below the present sea-level during an interstadial of the Würm glaciation. Located at the foot of a 20 m-high granite cliff, the site would have looked out over a narrow coastal plain and a river estuary, affording protection from the weather, opportunities for ambush hunting of large mammals moving between the hinterland and the coast, and access to coastal resources including large nodules of Cretaceous flint exposed along the shore.

In 2000–2003, new field investigations were undertaken to re-locate the site, recover new cultural material, and obtain new data on stratigraphy and dating (Cliquet et al. 2011; Mercier et al. 2013). A diving campaign resulted in the collection of more stone tools and sediment cores for pollen analysis and dating. The new observations confirmed the presence of in situ material including refitting flakes and the possibility of two occupation layers. High-resolution seismic survey of the bay in front of the site was begun but terminated prematurely by bad weather. These results have confirmed the broad outlines of the original interpretation. An OSL date of 70 ka and pollen indicating interstadial vegetation conditions are consistent with Marine Isotope Stage 5a or early Stage 4, and a sea-level about 20 m or more below present. The main change has been a re-study and re-appraisal of the original flint artefacts. Together with the newly recovered material, this has resulted in re-assignment of the assemblage to the Denticulate Mousterian rather than the Mousterian of Acheulean tradition as originally proposed.

The original report is well worth consulting, with a wealth of detail about the site in its sedimentary, geological and topographic context. The survival of undisturbed cultural material on a coastline where exposure to wave action might be expected to have caused major disturbance or destruction demonstrates the potential for the recovery of similar material elsewhere. The more recent investigations at the site confirm the original findings, while also indicating that there is more to be learned about the site and that further investigations would be rewarding. The original field investigations at La Mondrée were well ahead of their time

and represent a unique body of information that should be more widely known. The evidence from this site should encourage the search for evidence of Palaeolithic settlement elsewhere and at greater depth on the submerged landscapes offshore of Europe's Atlantic and North Sea coastlines. It also provides important clues about the conditions in which underwater archaeological deposits are likely to have been preserved and where to look for them.

For all these reasons, the issue of the volume in digital form on the Internet Archive as a document freely available to an international audience is to be warmly welcomed. The new publication could not have happened without the determined advocacy of Nicholas Flemming, who is responsible for initiating the process with the help of the Digital Scholarship Team at Southampton University Library, and for contacting the family of Frédéric Scuvée and Jean Verague, M. Karel Scuvée and Mme Catherine Verague, who are the copyright holders, and who graciously gave their agreement to re-issue the volume as an openly accessible digital document.

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